

First Lean Six Sigma Master Black Belts Graduate

As the Army's Business Transformation 'year of execution' progresses, an important landmark has been realized, one intended to deliver results the Army could only have imagined just a few years ago: the creation of the Lean Six Sigma *Master Black Belt* (MBB).

After two years of trained Lean Six Sigma (LSS) Green and Black Belts running continuous process improvement projects aimed at cutting costs and improving effectiveness across Army ranks, the first official class of Master Black Belts, the highest internationally recognized level of Lean Six Sigma expertise, has carefully been chosen to complete its first steps toward certification. On 3 August 2007, a total of 15 hand-picked candidates representing different commands and staff across the Army were honored in a ceremony celebrating their completion of initial MBB training. The ceremony followed a rigorous selection process in addition to two weeks of intense classroom training and seminar-style instruction where the students mostly taught themselves, guided by facilitators, in an environment that was every bit as challenging as it was meticulous. The students presented, evaluated, and conducted daily seminars and workshops, and in addition received continuous peer reviews and assessments. In two weeks they learned how to teach future waves of Army LSS trainees.

The 15 candidates epitomize a core group of promising men and women intent on guiding the Army to a culture of continuous improvement and passing their knowledge and experience to future generations of Army Soldiers and Civilians. This type of achievement confirms that a top-notch, disciplined program aimed at "changing the way the Army does business" is becoming more of a reality every day. It is an important step, exemplifying the Army's goal to transform business practices to better support the warfighting forces. The Master Black Belt will provide the institutional foundation for process management, improvement efforts, and a generation of innovation.

The creation of the Army LSS Master Black Belt

Over the last two years, a total 446 LSS Black Belts and 1,240 Green Belts across the Army have been trained and are managing continuous improvement projects. At the same time, 24 of those Black Belts and 42 Green Belts have been certified – that is, they have not only completed training, but have met stringent Army requirements of successfully completing a project that benefits the Warfighter. What exactly does this signify? Upon returning to their commands, how are newly graduated Black and Green Belts and their leaders advised and coached so they are efficiently using their skills to continuously improve their organizations’ performance? What guidance are they given by the Army upon returning to their commands?

THE GRADUATES



Moments before the MBB graduates receive their course completion diplomas, they listen to Ronald Rezek, Assistant to the Deputy Undersecretary for Business Transformation as he congratulates them while encouraging them to lead future MBBs while pursuing noteworthy projects from which the Army can benefit.

Enter the Master Black Belt, one of the more important determinants of how the Army’s Lean Six Sigma (LSS) program is to evolve in the coming years. Having selected 15 proven and highly capable professionals, the Army is unveiling its next step in moving towards a responsive, flexible Warfighting Support Force more capable of

sustaining the Operational Army. This is where the MBB is a vital pillar in the Army's current 'execution' phase. By putting in place the proper personnel to drive much-needed changes across the Army, the expectations for this program – for this first crop of newly minted Master Black Belts -- remain very high.

Those who designed and developed the MBB course deliberately made the selection process a challenging one, setting the MBB achievement bar at a very high level. The MBB candidates, who were nominated by their organizations to attend the initial two-week MBB course, were already recognized for their strong leadership skills, their solid records of success, as well as for their mentorship abilities and business acumen. Those selected -- consisting of active duty Soldiers and government civilians, many with prior military service -- have not only served as advisors, counselors, coaches, and teachers – but also, as individuals known for mastering and managing complex situations and have demonstrated “high performance” throughout their careers. Once the candidates were identified, they underwent a scrupulous interview process in order to categorize and confirm those individuals who best demonstrated the skills necessary to succeed as MBBs.

The road taken by this first class of candidates is an arduous one. Reaching the status of Army MBB requires a candidate to master the LSS Program of Instruction (POI) which demonstrates the candidates' competence in teaching the components of the Army's POI as well as coaching and mentoring various LSS roles (e.g. senior leaders, Project Sponsors, and Belts). Almost every moment in the classroom is spent immersed in lively discussions and practical exercises on business strategy, deployment management, project management, and team building.

On 3 August, the MBB's finalized their in-class work and the Army LSS MBB final exam was administered. Passing their first written examination, scoring 80% or higher, following their two weeks of training was their *first* step toward certification and toward completing their entire course requirement. Simply graduating from the course does not culminate in MBB certification -- this only occurs once they complete the following:

- lead two Black Belt-level projects to completion

- coach at least two Black Belts on two different (Black Belt level) projects to completion.
- successfully co-teach the Army-approved Black Belt POI in classroom settings as validated by the Army MBB supervising the course

These projects are supervised with the help of the DMAIC (Define-Measure-Analyze-Improve-Control) methodology. This class of MBB's has a lot to look forward to in the near future, but this first step is an important one -- one that should without a doubt be deemed a building block for the Master Black Belt program and for Army Warfighters everywhere.

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Just before receiving their hard-earned diplomas for completing their coursework last week, the class was congratulated by Ronald Rezek, Director of Continuous Process Improvement and Assistant to Deputy Undersecretary (for Business Transformation) Mike Kirby. Mr. Rezek's words were insightful, heartfelt and congratulatory, but they also admonished the 15 candidates, reminding them that they now face exceedingly high expectations. While it is an accomplishment to be "among the first" as Rezek pointed out, it is more important to remember that it "isn't where you start, it's where you finish." Rezek challenged this first core group of MBBs to take charge, to set higher standards, to prioritize, to avoid obscurity, but most importantly, to put their newfound knowledge to work – to meet and exceed all expectations.

As this first class of Master Black Belts return to their commands, back to their frontlines, the precedent has been set. It is here where a new chapter in the Army's move forward continues.

- Office of the DUSA (BT)